The door had been a hatch, but the lock that had been installed next to it was that of a standard door system. Alex was wondering about it, about every different door and lock along the corridor. Was there a central computer controlling it he could coerce?

Tristan banged a fist on the door. It didn't sound thick, like a hatch should. "Open this door." His voice boomed in the corridor. A group that had been heading their way turned around and a man, heading away, picked up speed. "If I have to disable the lock, I'll make you suffer for it."

"Right," the man inside replied. "I'm not stupid, I know who you are. I let you in and I'm as good as dead."

"Unlock this door, and you have my word I will not harm you in any way."

"You expect me to trust you?"

"Do you really think a man like me would still be alive if I went around breaking my word?"

Alex raised an eyebrow and wondered if that was an act. The one thing Alex had realized without a doubt was that Tristan got his way, no matter what he needed to do to get there.

The locked switched to green. And Tristan had gotten his way again.

Alex followed Tristan inside.

The man was on the other side of the room, seated at a table with the bloody knife on it along with bandages, a sealant spray, and a gun which the man was holding, arm resting on the table.

"Stay there." The man's voice shook from exhaustion and blood loss. The trail they'd followed had been long. He slid his arm on the table to keep the gun pointed at Tristan.

The room had a small cooking area, a bed, and a computer terminal. The most basic of lodging. An opened case could have contained the rifle. Tristan was examining that. He glanced at the man.

"Your boss said there's a price on my head. Who put up the bounty?"

The man snorted, then winced. "You think I worked with that bunch of amateurs? I'd rather shoot myself."

"So you used them as a diversion?"

"Word was they knew where you were. Figured I'd wait until you killed them, then bring you down myself."

"So you know about the bounty?"

The man laughed and almost doubled over. "Bounty? This isn't on the boards. Everyone knows about this."

"Who placed it?" Tristan's voice gained a growl.

"Who do you think?" The man managed to sound defiant. "The kid's father. I don't know what it's about, but you picked the wrong guy to piss off. He's all over the media. Do you have any idea what you did? He isn't going after you. He's coming after all of us as retaliation. And from what I hear, he can do it too. He's that powerful."

Tristan indicated the wall next to the man. "Show me."

The man's face scrunched in pain as he turned and left bloody trails on the hidden controls. A section of the wall flickered, and men and women dancing appeared. The image changed quickly as he searched through the feeds. And finally settled on a man.

He wasn't wearing the white suit he had when he'd shown up at Tristan's house. This suit was pale green with yellow trim, but it still looked expensive. He spoke to the recorders. "I don't care what length I have to go. I will not stand down! From the moment I joined SpaceGov, I have been pushing for stricter laws when it comes to the spaceways. Those criminals don't want that. Those mercs, who are nothing more than pirates in better clothes, with better training, they can't stop me and they know it, so they resort to taking my son." He paused to compose himself, but his face still showed the anger his voice didn't. "My son has nothing to do with this. He is an innocent, and I did everything I could to shield him from the worst side of people. But they took him."

The man pressed a button on a wristband, and a hologram appeared in the air between him and the recorders. Tristan getting out of a black car and opening the door as Alex escorted Emil. They exchanged words, then Emil entered the back along with Tristan.

"These two criminals attacked a security agent, stole his vehicle, lied their way into the academy looking for my son, and took him. They took him!" He pressed another button.

"If you ever want to see your son again," Tristan's voice said from the screen, "walk away from

this. Space is ours. We rule it, not you."

Alex looked at Tristan in confusion, searching for a reaction to the blatant forgery. Nothing, of course.

The man closed his eyes. "I will not be dictated to in this fashion." He took a breath. "Mercenaries keep claiming they are doing a service for the population. Getting their hands dirty when others can't. But now you're showing your hand. Does that Samalian speak for all of you? I'm going to give you a chance to demonstrate that he doesn't. Stop him. Bring me back my son, and I'll know he's an aberration."

He paused, took a breath. "I want to believe you'll do that because you are the good people you claim to be. That mercenaries help people. But I know the truth. I know the one language you speak, so I'm going to speak it too. Fifty-million. Fifty-million SpaceGov credits to any one person or group of persons who brings this criminal to me."

Alex stared at the screen, but he couldn't hear anymore over the sound of his own blood. Fifty-million? And he'd said it over public vid for everyone to hear. It wouldn't only be mercenaries coming after them. Regular folks would want a chance at getting that reward. That man hadn't quite turned the entire universe against the two of them, but almost.

Tristan made a quick motion that snapped Alex back.

The man at the table was looking down at the knife handle sticking out of his chest. He looked up, blood beginning to drip from his lips. "You said you wouldn't—" The man slumped over the table.

Well, there was a reaction.

Tristan glared at the screen. A man and a woman were talking about the market prices of fruits. "Find me everything you can about the man who hired me."

Alex looked at the terminal. "I don't know if I'll be able to do—"

Tristan planted his fist in the screen. "Find him!" The surface, which was supposed to be able to resist most impacts, was cracked.

Alex went to the terminal. He had no intention of becoming the target of Tristan's anger right now. He put his earpiece in, tried to make it fit comfortably, and set to work as Tristan stormed out of the room.

Finding the feed's origin point was simple; it was a public feed. Getting into the broadcaster's system was harder. He had to use the terminal's AI as a working platform, and it wasn't much of one. Barely a million lines of code strung together over a processor that had been old when Alex was born.

He only made it one layer past the public access, but that was enough to get him more details. His name was Tomas Masters and—Alex cursed—it confirmed the man worked for SpaceGov. No wonder he'd felt confident in offering that kind of money.

If Masters had enough money to buy himself a seat on SpaceGov's controlling board, fifty-million wouldn't even register. And from that seat, he could make the kind of decisions that would make anyone traveling between solar systems' life very difficult.

Alex didn't know how much of his history lessons he believed, but SpaceGov was supposedly as old as space travel, set in place by solar systems tired of fighting over the vast emptiness between them. As more and more systems became populated, SpaceGov grew until it became the entity it was now. So large it could do what Masters threatened.

SpaceGov was the Law in the vastness of space, at least officially. They had ships, and they did go after pirates who became too much of a threat. Alex had run into them a time or two. Mostly SpaceGov acted as arbiter between solar systems, kept them from erupting into wars that would disrupt the space ways.

Within systems, the local government was officially the law, but everyone knew that within any system a corporation was established, SpaceGov were the one governing. Corporations rarely caused SpaceGov trouble; they kept their wars quiet.

Alex couldn't get much more than that, but he had a name, and confirmed the employer, so his programs could take over the search.

While they did, he looked at corporate public feeds. If Masters was really going after mercenaries, corporations would react. Mercs were corporations' cannon fodder. They were who corporations sent out when something needed to be done, but wasn't so important as to risk their own security forces.

And he saw disquiet there. Nothing that indicated they were planning on taking action, but they were taking this seriously. Alex cursed.

His programs returned a list of banking institutions. And a glance at their security told him he wasn't getting in from this terminal. He tried to think of what else he could try, where else he could look, but until his programs gave him something new, he'd hit a code-stop. He instructed his programs to send what they found to his secure node and disconnected.

He pocketed the earpiece and looked at the dead man, and the pool of dark, drying blood. He shuddered. Left alone with a murdered man. Alex didn't believe in stories of the dead coming back to avenge themselves, but he still hated being around them.

He almost opened the door. The imaginary twitch of his leg reminded him Tristan hadn't said anything about him leaving it. He could leave. He could lose himself in the station's crowd and Tristan wouldn't find him. But where would he go? He could use one of his IDs, make it off the station, find a quiet place and lie low for...how long? Forever?

Alex didn't want to lie low. Being with Tristan was dangerous, but that thrill spoke to the monster inside him. Made it smile, reminded him that this is what he needed, deserved. He faced the room.

He wouldn't leave, so what could he do? He didn't have what he needed to remove evidence they had been here. He and Tristan had shed skin cells, or fur in Tristan's case. How hard did they work at enforcing laws? A fight in a hall was one thing, this was murder.

Had Tristan left him to take the fall?

It would fit his personality. Use him and dump him. But he'd told Alex to find information, which he hadn't given him yet. He chose to believe Tristan wouldn't have given him that order if he didn't intend on hearing the result. His father's voice laughed and Alex looked at the terminal.

He could keep busy. He had to keep busy and not think of the possibility he was on his own again. Alone.

He put the earpiece in and made his way through the station's system. How long had the man paid the room for? That would tell him when he had to get out of here, even if Tristan wasn't back.

The system was schizophrenic—so many computers forced to work together, told to be one system when their core programming told them they were individuals. At least it didn't seem to be insane, or not a type of insanity that would kill everyone here. It just made navigating through the chaos difficult.

He did find the room. It was long-term lodging, charged to the renter's account every objective month. So long as there was money available, no one would show up here. It had been paid twelve days before. Alex traced the account to a bank, a medium-sized one with security he could get through even with this terminal, but he didn't bother. If he didn't want to leave he had eighteen days, even if the account was empty.

He took the earpiece out. He knew how long he had. The question was, how long would he give Tristan? When did he admit to himself he'd been abandoned again?

The door opened and Alex was up, hand on a knife, but he stopped as he saw Tristan. The relief he felt almost took his legs out from under him.

Tristan eyed him, his gaze dropping to the hand. Alex took it off the knife and took a relaxed stance. Tristan had a package under his arm. Alex tried to decipher the Samalian's expression. Surprise? Satisfaction? Boredom? Had he expected Alex to run? Had he even cared? That one was easy: of course he hadn't.

Tristan placed the package on a clean spot on the table and opened it. He handed Alex a sprayer. "Start cleaning."

Alex looked it over. It was the same thing he'd used in the hover, only more concentrated. He adjusted the nozzle so he'd have enough to do the entire room, and began spraying the walls.

He kept an eye on Tristan as he took a roll from the package and laid it on the floor. It was long enough Tristan could stretch on it. He opened it and put the body in, closing it. Tristan pulled the human-wrapped package by the door before tapping the control at one end.

Even from ten-feet away Alex felt the heat. A portable incinerator. Of course something that illegal would be available here. There would be nothing left of the body, which meant that once Alex was done and every DNA trace had been destroyed, no one would know what had

happened here.

"What did you find out?"

Alex forced himself to continue spraying. He'd done the best he could, he reminded himself. "Not much. The man's name is Tomas Masters. Like he claimed in the vid, he works for SpaceGov. I found eight banks linked to him, but the terminal wasn't powerful enough for me to get in them. I'm going to need to use the computer on your ship to get in them."

Tristan didn't reply.

Alex looked over his shoulder, and almost stepped back into the wet wall at the anger directed at him. Fuck, what had he—

He raised his hands. "I just did a quick evaluation of it, I swear, I didn't talk to it. I just needed to know what it could do in case you wanted me to work in a hurry. I swear. I never spoke to it."

Tristan's face didn't smooth, but he nodded to the wall. So Alex went back to spraying, feeling the Samalian's eyes on him the entire time.

The bag beeped a few minutes before Alex finished, standing too close to Tristan for his liking, considering how angry he'd looked. The room cooled. Alex stood. The little that was left was where they were standing. The blood on the table and floor had turned into pale pink spots that could be spilled juice for all the organic markers that would be left in them.

Tristan handed Alex his knife back. Alex hadn't noticed him collecting it, too focused on cleaning the room. And he rolled the bag back up. By the lack of crunching, there was only ash left in it. Alex sprayed where they'd stood, and then followed Tristan through the corridors.

He disposed of the canister after ten minutes of walking, dropping it in a disposal and hoping it would be destroyed as it should be.

Tristan took them through a part of the station they hadn't gone through before, and kept to lightly populated areas. The intent had been to avoid having to fight again, Alex was sure of it, but it didn't work. They'd had to fight often enough that by the time they reached the docks, they were covered in blood.

That seemed to act as the deterrent trying to avoid people hadn't.

The corpulent man didn't give their appearance a second look. "Your ship's here and secured, as I promised."

Tristan ignored him and took a long time with the lock. Alex kept an eye on the dockmaster until he heard the hatch open, then he backed in, closing it.

"Wake the boy," Tristan said as he headed for the cockpit.

Alex froze. Wake Emil? Why? What was the point to taking him out of cryo if they were leaving? He looked at the door. Tristan had implied Alex couldn't protect Emil. Was this going to be his punishment for having looked through the computer's code?

Tristan couldn't be that cruel, could he?